CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMISSION: 'You can read in several languages, are acquainted with higher mathematics, and can carry out certain kinds of work. Do you consider this makes a man of you?'
OTARK: 'Certainly. Are people capable of anything else?' (STATE COMMISSION material—From cross-examination of an OTARK.)

A Day of Wrath

TWO men on horseback rode out of the valley, which was thickly overgrown with grass and began to ascend the mountainside. In front, the forester sat astride a hook-nosed roan. Donald Betly, on a chestnut mare, brought up the rear. The mare stumbled on the stony mountain path and fell to its knees. Betly, who had been lost in thought, nearly flew out of the saddle, which was of English make with one belly-strap, and slipped down onto the horse's neck.

The forester waited for him higher up on the path.

'Keep its head up, it always stumbles,' he called out.

Betly bit his lip and glared at him in vexation. 'Damn him, he could have warned me,' he thought. He was mad at himself too because the mare had fooled him. She had inflated her belly when he saddled her so that strap would be loose.

He yanked on the reins so hard that the horse danced around and stepped back.

The path had levelled out again. They were travelling along a plateau. The tops of fir-wooded hills sloped ahead of them in the distance.

The horses were moving at a long-paced trot. Sometimes they would break into a brisk canter, racing each other. When the mare managed to get in front, Betly could see the thin, suntanned, clean-shaven cheeks of the forester, and his sombre-looking eyes, which seemed glued to the road, as if he were

utterly unaware of his companion's presence.

'I'm too artless,' Betly thought to himself. 'And it never does me any good. I've spoken to him five times and all he does is grunt in answer, or pays no attention whatsoever. He doesn't give a damn about me. He seems to think that if a person likes to talk he's an empty-headed chatter-box who doesn't deserve respect. Out here in the sticks they don't know how to gauge things. A journalist doesn't mean a thing to them. Even journalists like . . . Aw heck, I won't talk to him either, as far as that goes. What do I care! . . .'

Gradually his mood changed for the better. Betly was a man whom luck had always favoured and he considered that other people should enjoy life with the fervour that he did. He found the forester's reticence rather surprising, but he felt no enmity towards the man.

The weather had been bad from early morning, but the sky was beginning to clear up, and the fog had thinned. The greyish film in the sky had dispersed into separate clouds. Huge shadows swiftly sped over the darkened forests and ravines, accentuating the severe, wild, untrammelled character of the locality.

Betly clapped the mare on its damp, sweat-smelling neck.

'Your front feet must have been hobbled when you were let out to graze at nights, that's why you stumble. But it's all right, we'll get along.'

He let out the reins and caught up with the forester.

'I say, Mr. Meller, were you born in these parts?'

'No,' the forester answered without turning around.

'Where are you from, then?'

'Far away from here.'

'Been here long?'

'Long enough,' Meller turned and looked at the journalist.

'You had better keep your voice down or they'll hear us.'

'Who're they?'

'The Otarks, of course, who else? They'll hear us and pass the word on, or wait in ambush, jump us from behind, and tear

us to bits . . . And it would be much better if they didn't catch on why we're here.'

'Do things like that happen often? I've read in the papers that they seldom attack.' The forester didn't answer.

Betly involuntarily looked back over his shoulder.

'Can they shoot? Do they have arms of any kind? Rifles, or automatic machine-guns?'

'They rarely shoot. Their hands aren't made that way . . . Aw heck, I meant their paws! They find it inconvenient to use arms of any kind.'

'Paws,' Betly echoed him. 'That means you don't look on them as human beings?'

'Who, us?'

'Yes, you. The local inhabitants.'

The forester spat.

'We sure don't. No one considers them human beings here.'

He spoke in chopped, curt phrases. But Betly had already forgotten his decision to curb his tongue.

'I say, have you ever spoken to them? Is it true they speak fluently?'

'The older ones do. The ones that were here when they had the research laboratory . . . The younger ones don't speak as well. But they are more dangerous. Their heads are twice the size.' The forester suddenly pulled on the reins and brought his horse up short. There was a bitter note to his voice.

'Listen, all this talk won't do any good. It's no use. I've answered those questions dozens of times.'

'What's no use?'

'This trip we're making. It's no use. Everything's going to stay just as it is.'

'Why are you so sure? I'm from a big influential newspaper. We've got a lot of pull. We're collecting this material for the State Commission. If we can prove the Otarks are really so dangerous, drastic measures will be taken. You know, this time Army forces will be used against them.'

'It makes no difference, it won't do any good, anyway,' the forester sighed. 'You aren't the first one to come here. There's someone every year and all they're interested in are the Otarks. But you don't give a damn about the people that have to live with the Otarks. Everyone asks: "Is it true they can understand geometry?" . . . Or, "Is it true they understand the theory of relativity?" As if that really means anything! As if that's reason enough not to destroy them!'

'But that's what I am here for,' Betly interrupted, 'to collect material for the commission. And then the whole country will be told . . .'

'Do you think that the others who were here didn't collect material?' Meller broke in. 'Besides . . . besides how can you understand what's going on here? You've got to live here to understand. It's one thing to come for a short stay, and it's quite another thing to live here all the time. Aw . . .! What's the use of talking! Let's get going.' He touched his boots to his horse's flanks. 'Starting from here is where you usually find them. Down here in this valley.'

The journalist and the forester stood atop the slope. The path went winding down in an undulating zig-zag, seeming to drop from under the horses' hooves in perilous uncertainty.

Far away, down below, lay the bush-covered valley, cut across by a narrow, rocky stream. Straight from its banks rose a forest wall in steep ascent, and beyond it, in the boundless distance, the snow-whitened slopes of the mountain range.

From here the eye could take in the surrounding country for miles around, but Betly, could not see the slightest sign of life. There was not a single trail of chimney smoke or a stack of hay to indicate that the district was inhabited. It seemed as if the place were dead.

The sun hid behind a cloud and it became cold. The journalist suddenly felt that he had lost all wish to follow the forester down into the valley. He jerked his shoulders to shake off the chill. He thought of his warm, heated apartment, and the warm

bright rooms of the editorial office. But then he took himself in hand. 'What nonsense! I've been in worse situations than this. What's there to be afraid of? I'm a good shot and I'm quick on the move. Who else could they have sent but me?' He saw Meller slipping his rifle off his shoulder and followed suit.

The mare was picking its way cautiously down the narrow path.

When they had finally gained level ground Meller said:

'Try to keep next to me. And better not talk. We've got to get to Steglik's farm by eight o'clock. We'll spend the night there.'

They gave rein to their horses and rode in complete silence for about two hours. They headed up the slope and skirted Mount Bear so that on their right hand they had a continuous wall of forest and on their left a precipice with an overgrowth of bushes so sparse and stunted they couldn't afford much of a hiding place for anyone. They descended to the river and made their way along its rocky bottom until they reached an abandoned, asphalt road in a state of decay with grass growing through the cracks.

As soon as they were on the road Meller suddenly brought his horse to a halt and stood listening in tense alertness. He dismounted, got down on his knees and put his ear to the road.

'We're in trouble,' he said, as he straightened up. 'Someone's following close behind on horseback. Let's get off the road.'

Betly quickly dismounted and they led the horses behind a ditch among the alders.

About two minutes later the clatter of horse's hooves became clearly audible. The sound increased rapidly. You could feel that the horseman was riding his horse hard.

Then, through the leaves they saw a grey horse galloping for all it was worth, mounted by a man, dressed in yellow riding breeches and slicker, who sat his saddle with unpractised awkwardness. He passed by so near that Betly had a clear view of

his face and realised that he had seen the man before. There had been a bunch of men around the bar in town yesterday evening—about five or six broadshouldered, noisy fellows, dressed in loud-coloured clothes. What he remembered especially were their eyes —they were all the same. Lazy, hooded and brazenly insolent. Eyes like those, the journalist knew, belonged to gangsters.

The horseman had no sooner passed them than Meller sprung out onto the road.

'Hey!'

The man pulled at the reins and brought the horse to a stop.

'Hey, wait a minute!'

He looked hard at the forester and evidently recognised him. For several seconds they held each other's gaze. Then the man waved his hand, turned his horse and galloped on.

The forester followed him with his eyes until the sound of the horse's hooves died away in the distance. Then he whirled round with a groan and struck his head with his fist.

'Well, nothing's going to come of it now! That's for sure.'

'What's the matter?' Betly asked. He came out from his hiding place behind the bushes.

'Nothing . . . It's just that it won't work out now.'

'But why?' The journalist looked at the forester and was surprised to see tears in his eyes.

'Well, that's done it,' Meller said and turned away wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. 'Oh, the skunks! The dirty skunks!'

'Listen!' Betly was beginning to lose patience. 'If you're going to be so nervous I suppose there really is no sense in going on further.'

'Nervous!' the forester exclaimed. 'Me nervous? Is this what you call nervous? Look!'

He flung up his arm and pointed at the bough of a fir heavy with red-coloured cones, which hung over the road about thirty steps away.

Betly had no time to realise why he was supposed to look

at it, when a shot rang out, powder smoke wafted into his face and the end cone dropped to the asphalt below.

'That's how nervous I am,' Meller said and went to the bushes for his horse.

They reached the farm as darkness was falling.

A tall, black-bearded man with a mop of unkempt hair came out of the unfinished log house and stood silently watching Betly and the forester as they unsaddled the horses. Then a red-headed woman, with a flat, expressionless face, whose hair was in the same state of untidiness, appeared on the porch. She was followed by three children, two boys of about eight and nine and a girl of thirteen, who was so thin she looked like a crooked line drawn on a piece of paper.

The five of them stood there showing neither surprise, joy, nor sorrow at the arrival of Meller and the journalist. They just stood there and looked. Betly didn't like this silent welcome in the least.

During supper he tried to pick up a conversation.

'I say, how do you get along with the Otarks? Do they bother you much?'

'What?' the black-bearded farmer said, and, putting his palm to his ear, bent across the table. 'What?' he shouted. 'Speak louder. I don't hear very well.'

This went on for several minutes with the farmer stubbornly refusing to understand what was wanted of him. At last he spread his arms wide and said, 'Sure the Otarks come around.' Did they bother him? 'No, personally they did not bother him.' He couldn't say anything about other people because he didn't know. He didn't have anything to say.

In the middle of this enlightening conversation the thin little girl wrapped herself in a shawl and went out without saying a word to anyone.

As soon as the plates were emptied the farmer's wife brought two mattresses from the next room and began making up the beds for the travellers on the floor.

But Meller stopped her.

'I think we'd better spend the night in the shed.'

The woman straightened up without saying a word. The farmer quickly got up from the table.

'Why? I think you'd better sleep in the house.' But the forester had already doubled up the mattresses and was carrying them out.

The tall farmer lighted the way to the shed with a lantern. For a moment he stood watching as they arranged the mattresses and got ready for bed. An expression flitted across his face as though he were going to say something, but, as if on second thought, he just raised his hand and scratched his head. Then he went away.

'What was all that for?' Betly asked. 'Do you mean to say the Otarks get into the houses?'

Meller picked up a thick board from the ground and jammed it up against the heavy door, checking to see it wouldn't slip down.

'Let's go to bed,' he said. 'Anything can happen. They get into houses too.'

The journalist sat down on the mattress and began to unlace his boots.

'Are there any real bears left? I don't mean the Otarks, but real wild bears. There used to be a lot of bears running wild in these forests.'

'Not a single one,' Meller answered. The first thing they did after they escaped from the laboratory on the island was to destroy all the real bears. The same thing happened to the wolves. There used to be racoons and foxes here as well as other forest animals. They got poison from the ruined laboratory and poisoned all the smaller animals. Wolves were lying dead all through the district . . . for some reason they didn't eat the wolves. But they ate all the bears. They sometimes even eat each other.'

'Eat each other?'

'Sure. They're not human beings. You never know what to expect from them.'

'That means you consider they are just wild beasts?'

'No.' The forester shook his head. 'We don't consider them just wild beasts. It's only in the cities you argue about whether they are animals or men. We people here know they are neither the one nor the other. Before it was all very simple. There were people, and there were animals, and that's all. Now another species has appeared. The Otarks. It's the first time anything of the kind has happened since the world began. The Otarks are not just wild animals—it would be great if they were. But they aren't human beings, either.'

Although he realised the banality of the question he was going to ask, he couldn't help asking it.

'Is it true that they learn higher mathematics very easily?'

The forester turned on him as if shot from a catapult.

'Listen, will you shut up about higher mathematics! Just shut up! I don't give two hoots for anyone's knowledge of higher mathematics. Sure the Otarks find higher mathematics as easy as pie! So what . . .? You've got to be a human being—that's what's important.'

He turned away and bit his lip.

'Nerves,' Betly thought to himself. 'He's got it bad. He's on the verge of a nervous breakdown.'

But the forester soon calmed down. He felt embarrassed for losing control of himself. After a short silence he said:

'Excuse me, but have you seen him personally?'

'Seen whom?'

'That genius. Fidler.'

'Fidler . . .? Sure I've seen him. I talked to him just before I came out here. I interviewed him for the newspaper.'

'I suppose they keep him wrapped up in wax paper? So that a single drop of rain doesn't wet him.'

'Uh-huh. They sure do keep him well guarded.' Betly recalled how they had checked his pass and searched him the first time

outside the wall surrounding the Science Centre. Then his pass had been checked again followed by another search—before he was allowed into the garden where Fidler came out to see him. They certainly did keep close watch over him. He really was a mathematical genius. He was only thirteen when he wrote his ' Changes in the general theory of relativity.' He'd have to be a genius for that.

' What does he look like?'

What does he look like?

The journalist became somewhat confused. He recalled Fidler as he had walked into the garden dressed in a white suit. There had been something clumsy and misshapen about his figure. He had wide hips, narrow shoulders and a short neck . . . It had been a strange interview because Betly had had the feeling that he was the one that was being interviewed. Fidler answered his questions, of course, but he seemed to do it in a very flippant manner as if he were laughing at the journalist and at the whole world of ordinary people who lived out there beyond the wall of the Science Centre. He also asked the journalist questions. But they were idiotic questions, like whether Betly cared for carrot juice . . . as if he, Fidler, were carrying on an experimental study of an ordinary human being.

' Oh, he's average height,' Betly said. ' He's got little eyes . . . But didn't you ever see him? He used to come to the laboratory here, on the lake.'

' He was here twice,' Mellor answered, ' but he was guarded so closely that ordinary people couldn't come within a mile of him. At that time the Otarks were kept in an enclosure and Richard and Klein worked with them. They ate Klein up. After the Otarks escaped Fidler never showed up around here again . . . What does he say about the Otarks now?'

' He says it was a very interesting scientific experiment. With great prospects. But he's not occupied with that problem at the moment. He's working on something connected with cosmic rays . . .'

'But why was the whole thing started in the first place? What for?'

'Well, just how should I explain it . . .?' Betly thought a moment. 'You see, it's this way in science: "What if?" A lot of discoveries have come from this.'

'What do you mean by, '"What if?"'

'Well, take for instance: "What if we place a live wire in a magnetic field?" This "what if" gave us the electric motor . . . In short, it just means experimenting.'

'Experimenting,' Meller ground his teeth on the word. 'They experimented and let cannibals out among the people. And now they've forgotten all about us. Fight your own battles, as best you can they say, Fidler doesn't care two pins about the Otarks now, or about us either. They're breeding in hundreds and no one knows what they've got up their sleeves or what plans they are hatching against us people.' He was silent for a while and then he sighed. 'When you think of what they've done, it's enough to make your hair stand on end! Imagine turning animals into people, and making them cleverer than people. Some of those people in the cities sure have gone daffy.'

He got up, took his loaded rifle and laid it down on the ground near his mattress.

'Listen, Mr Betly, if hell breaks loose, I mean if anybody starts banging on the door or tries to break it down you just stay put, just hug that mattress and keep your head down. Otherwise we'll shoot each other in the dark. You lay low . . . I know what to do. I'm so used to this, I'm like a trained dog . . . I wake up from instinct.'

In the morning when Betly walked out of the shed the sun was shining so bright and the grass and trees were so fresh after the rain that all that night talk seemed like horror stories.

The black-bearded man was already out working his field—his shirt a white spot on the other side of the river. For an instant the idea flitted across the journalist's mind that perhaps

this was happiness—to rise with the sun, with no knowledge of the bustle and anxieties of city life, to know only the handle of your spade with its lump of brown earth.

But the forester quickly brought him back to reality. He appeared from around the shed with his rifle in his hand.

'Come here, I'll show you something.'

They skirted the shed and found themselves in the kitchen-garden facing the back of the house. Here Meller's behaviour astonished Betly. He sprinted past the bushes in a crouched position and squatted down in a ditch near the potato rows. He made a sign for the journalist to follow his example.

They began rounding the kitchen-garden, making their way along the ditch. Once they heard the woman's voice coming from the house, but they couldn't make out what she said.

Meller came to a stop.

'Look,' he said.

'At what?'

'You told me you were a hunter. Take a look!'

On a bare spot between the matted grass he saw a five-fingered imprint.

'Bear tracks?' Betly queried hopefully.

'Bear tracks? There haven't been any bears here for a helluva long time.'

'Then it was an Otark?'

The forester nodded.

'It's quite fresh,' the journalist whispered.

'Those tracks were made last night,' Meller said. 'See how damp they are. He was in the house before it began to rain.'

'In the house?' Betley felt his spine go cold as if he had come up against cold metal. 'You mean he was right in the house?'

The forester didn't answer, but ducked his head in the direction of the ditch and silently they made their way back.

When they reached the shed Meller waited until Betly got his breath back, and then said:

'That's the idea I got yesterday when we were at supper and Steglik pretended he couldn't hear well. He just wanted us to speak louder so that the Otark could catch what we were talking about. The Otark was hiding in the next room.

The journalist felt that his voice had gone hoarse.

'What are you talking about? Do you mean to say that people unite with the Otarks? Against their own folks?'

'You better keep your voice down,' the forester said. 'What do you mean by "unite"? Steglik couldn't do anything else. The Otark just came and stayed. They often do that. An Otark can come into a house, for instance, go into the bedroom and lie down on the bed, and sleep the night. Sometimes he kicks the people out of the house for a day or two and lives in it himself.'

'But don't people do something about it? Why do they let them do such things? Why don't they shoot?'

'How are they going to shoot when there are other Otarks in the woods? The farmer has children and cattle that graze in the pastures, and a house that can burn . . . down . . . But the main thing are the children . . . They can seize the children. You can't keep an eye on the little ones all the time. Besides they've taken all the rifles away from the farmers. That was at the very beginning. The very first year.'

'And the people gave them up?'

'What could they do? The ones that didn't were sorry afterwards . . .'

He broke off suddenly and stared at the thicket of osier which grew about fifteen steps away.

Meller jerked his rifle to his shoulder and cocked the trigger. A huge grown hulk rose up, from which two evil eyes glared in fright, and a voice spoke out:

'Hey, don't shoot! Don't shoot!'

Instinctively the journalist grabbed Meller's shoulder. A shot thundered forth but the bullet only grazed a branch. The brown hulk doubled up, rolled off into the forest, and disappeared among the trees. For a few seconds all that could be heard was

the snapping sound of breaking bushes, and then all was silent.

'What the holy devil!' The forester turned on him in a rage. 'What did you do that for?'

The journalist who had paled white as a sheet choked out in a whisper:

'He spoke like a human being. He begged you not to shoot.'

The forester looked at him for a moment, then his rage turned to tired indifference. He let his rifle down.

'Yes, I suppose . . . The first time it does make an impression.'

There was a slight rustle behind them. They both whirled round.

The farmer's wife said:

'Come and have breakfast. I have already set the table.'

At the table everybody pretended that nothing had happened.

After breakfast the farmer helped them saddle the horses. They took their leave wordlessly.

When they had ridden off, Meller said:

'Listen, what are your plans? I didn't quite get it straight. I was told to guide you around the mountain side, and that's all.'

'Well, that's all . . . That's all I want . . . to ride about the mountains here. See the people . . . talk to them. The more the better. Get acquainted with the Otarks, if possible. Sort of get a feel of the atmosphere.'

'Did you get a feel of the atmosphere back at that farm?'

Betly shrugged his shoulders.

The forester suddenly brought his horse up short.

'Quiet . . .'

He was listening attentively.

'Someone's running this way. Something's happened at the farm.'

Betly had no time to get over his amazement at the forester's sense of hearing when someone shouted:

'Meller! Hey, Meller!'

They turned their horses, as the farmer ran up gasping for breath. He nearly fell as he grabbed for Meller's saddle horn.

'The Otark has taken Tina. He dragged her towards Moose canyon.'

He gasped for air, huge drops of sweat poured down his forehead.

With one huge swoop the forester had slung the farmer up on his saddle. His horse tore off at a swift gallop, the mud scattering high from under its flying hooves.

Betly could never have imagined that he would ever ride at such speed over such rugged terrain. He jumped pitfalls and the trunks of fallen trees, bushes and ditches rushed past in a blurred mosaic pattern. Somewhere along that frantic race a branch had torn off his cap, but he didn't even notice.

Of course, it really did not depend on him. His horse in the fierce heat of the race did its best to catch up with the roan. Betly had his arms tight around the mare's neck. He was certain he was going to be killed.

They galloped through the forest, across a huge meadow, went dashing down a slope, passed the farmer's wife and rode down into a large canyon.

Here the forester swung down from his horse, with the farmer bringing up the rear. He ran down a narrow path which led to a thicket of young spruce trees so sparsely placed you could see right through them.

The journalist also dismounted, threw the reins over the horse's neck and rushed after Meller. He ran after the forester, on the run he automatically thought of how amazingly the latter had changed. Nothing remained of his former apathy and indecisiveness. His movements were light and collected. Without a moment's thought he changed directions, jumped over pits, crawled under low-lying branches. He rushed on as if the Otark's tracks had been chalked for him in a big thick line.

For a while Betly managed to keep up with the headlong speed of the pursuers, but gradually he began to lag behind. His

heart was thumping in his chest . . . his throat burned and he felt he was choking. He slowed down to a walk and for some minutes wandered around all by himself. Then he heard voices.

At the spot where the canyon narrowed down, the forester was standing in front of thick nut-grove with his rifle raised and trigger cocked, ready to shoot. The girl's father was standing nearby.

The forester spoke out spacing his words slowly:

' Let her go or I shall kill you.'

He directed his words towards the nut-grove.

A growl was his only answer intermingled with the crying of a child.

The forester repeated his words.

' Let her go or I will kill you. I will track you down, even if I die doing it. You know me.'

There was more growling and then a voice spoke out, but it wasn't human . . . more like a gramophone record that sort of ran all the words together.

' If I let her go, you won't kill me?'

' No,' Meller said. ' If you let her go, I won't touch you.'

There was silence in the thicket, except for the whimpering of the child.

Then there was the sound of twigs snapping and something white fluttered for a moment in the bushes. The thin little girl made her appearance. One of her hands was bloody. She supported it with her other hand.

Whimpering she passed the three men without turning her head, and with small staggering steps made her way to the house.

The three men followed her with their eyes.

The black-bearded farmer looked at Meller and Betly. In his wide-open eyes there was something so sharp and cutting that the journalist could not stand his gaze and dropped his eyes.

' There you are,' the farmer said.

They spent the night in an empty little hut in the forest. It

was only a few hours' ride to the island on the lake where the laboratory had once been, but Meller refused to travel in the dark.

It was their fourth day on the road and the journalist felt that his well tried optimism was beginning to give way. Formerly whenever he came up against any unpleasantness or trouble he always had a pet phrase: 'No matter what, life sure is a wonderful thing.' But now he realised that was all right if you are travelling in a comfortable train from one town to another or walking through the glass door of a hotel to meet some famous personage. But it just didn't do for the kind of thing that had happened to Steglik, for instance.

The whole district seemed to be stricken with some incurable ailment. The people were apathetic and unsociable. Even the children never laughed.

Once he asked Meller why the farmers did not leave the place. Meller explained that all they had was the land that belonged to them. But they couldn't even sell that. Nobody wanted it because of the Otarks.

Betly asked him:

'Why don't you leave?'

The forester had thought a moment, then pressed his lips together.

'I suppose it's because I'm of some use here. The Otarks are afraid of me. I don't have anything of my own. No family. No house. They can't put pressure on me in any way. The only thing they can do is fight me. And that's risky.'

'That means they respect you.'

Meller raised his head, and looked at the journalist in perplexity.

'The Otarks? . . . Oh, no! They don't know what respect means. They are not human beings. They can only be afraid. They are afraid of me because I kill them.'

But it seemed that the Otarks were ready to take a certain amount of risk. Both the forester and the journalist felt that.

They were under the impression that they were gradually being enclosed on all sides. Three times they had been shot at. Once from the window of an abandoned house and twice straight from the forest. After each attack they had discovered bear tracks. The number of tracks increased with every day . . .

In the hut they made a fire in the little stone fireplace and cooked themselves some supper. The forester lit his pipe and sat looking at the fire with a sorrowful expression on his face.

They had left the horses standing in front of the open door of the hut.

The journalist looked at the forester. His respect for this man had grown every day they were together. Meller had had no education, he had spent his whole life in the forest, he hardly ever read anything, and two minutes would have been more than enough to speak on a topic like art. Nevertheless the journalist felt that he would never have wanted a better friend. His ideas were always sensible and independent. If he had nothing to say he kept silent. At the beginning the journalist had thought him nervous and irritably weak, but now Betly understood that this was all because of his deep bitterness for the people of this large abandoned district, which, thanks to scientific experimentation was in such grievous trouble.

The last two days Meller had been quite ill. He had swamp fever. His face was all covered with red spots from the high temperature.

The fire was dying down in the fireplace. The forester suddenly asked:

'Is he young?'

'Who?'

'That scientist. I mean Fidler.'

'Yes,' the journalist answered. 'He must be about thirty. No more. Why?'

'That's bad. It's bad that he's young,' the forester said.

'Why?'

Meller was silent for a while.

'You see, they take the talented people and put them in secluded surroundings. They pet and pamper them. And of course they have no idea of what real life is like. That's why they have no feelings for people.' He sighed deeply. 'You've got to be a human being first . . . and then you can be a scientist.'

He got up.

'It's time to go to bed. We'll have to take turns or the Otarks will kill the horses.' It was the journalist's turn to stand watch first.

The horses were munching hay from a small stack that had been left there from last year.

He sat down on the doorstep of the hut and placed his gun between his knees.

The darkness fell quickly as if a blanket had been placed over everything. His eyes gradually became accustomed to the gloom. Then the moon came out. The sky was clear and starry. A flight of little birds, calling to each other passed high overhead. Contrary to the big birds, they migrated at night for safety's sake, in fear of falling prey to the big birds.

Betly got up and walked around the hut. The clearing where the little hut stood was tightly surrounded by forest on all sides, and this was dangerous. The journalist checked his trigger to see that it was cocked.

He began to go back over the events of the last few days, the conversations, the faces, and thought of all he would have to tell about the Otarks when he got back to the office. Then another thought struck him: come to think of it the thought of his return home was always present in his sub-conscious mind and of course lent a certain colouring to everything that had taken place. Even when they were chasing the Otark who had taken the little girl, Betly never forgot that no matter how horrible it was here, he could always return home and get away from it all.

'I'll be able to get away from all this horror,' he said to himself. 'But what about Meller? And all the others . . .?'

But this thought was too gloomy and he didn't want to think it through to the end.

He sat down in the shadow of the hut and began thinking of the Otarks. He recalled the heading of an article in one of the newspapers: 'Reason without Kindness.' This article was close to what the forester had said. He did not consider the Otarks human beings because they had no 'compassion', no feeling for others. 'Reason without kindness.' But was that possible? Could reason exist without kindness? What came first? Isn't kindness the logical effect of reasoning? Or was it the other way around . . .? It had already been established that the Otarks were more capable of logical reasoning than people, that they understood abstraction and abstract quantity and remembered it all much better than people.

He remembered that one of the farmers had told him and Meller that he had seen a practically naked Otark with hardly any fur on him at all, and the forester had said that the Otarks were becoming more and more like people all the time. Was it possible that they would one day conquer the world? Was reason without kindness stronger than the reason of a human being?

'But that won't be very soon,' he said to himself. 'Even if it does happen. I'll have lived my life and will be dead by that time, anyway.'

But what about the children? What kind of a world would they live in . . .!

In a world of Otarks or a world of inhuman sybernetic robots which some people considered cleverer than people?

His son suddenly appeared before him and spoke out:

'Papa, listen. We are . . . we, isn't that so? And they . . . are they. But they also think about themselves as . . . 'we', don't they?'

'You grow up too quickly,' Betly thought to himself. 'When I was seven I didn't ask such questions.'

Somewhere in back a twig snapped. The boy disappeared.

The journalist looked around in alarm and listened attentively.

Everything seemed to be all right.

A bat crossed the clearing in a slanting trembling flight.

He straightened up. The thought suddenly struck Betly that the forester was keeping something back from him. He had never told him anything about the rider who had galloped after them on that abandoned road.

He sat down again with his back to the wall of the hut. His son appeared in front of him again with another question:

'Papa, where did everything come from? The trees, and the houses, and air and people? Where did everything come from?'

He began telling the boy about the evolution of the Universe, then as though a knife had stabbed him, he woke up.

The moon had gone, but the sky had become lighter.

The horses weren't on the clearing any longer That is one of them wasn't there any longer, but the other was lying on its side and three grey shadows pottering around it. One of the shadows straightened up and the journalist saw a huge Otark with a large heavy head, wide open jaws and eyes that glittered in the semi-darkness.

Somewhere nearby he heard a whisper:

'He's sleeping.'

'No, he is already awake.'

'Go up to him.'

'He'll shoot.'

'He would have shot before now if he could. He's either asleep or he's paralysed with fear. Go on.'

The journalist had really lost all capability of movement. It seemed to be all happening in a dream. He realised that what had taken place was irreparable, that disaster had arrived, but he couldn't move a hand or foot.

The whispering went on:

'What about the other one? He'll shoot.'

'He's sick. He won't wake up . . . Go on . . .!'

With a colossal effort Betly managed to slant his eyes. An Otark was round the corner of the hut. He was small and looked like a pig.

Overcoming his shocked immobility the journalist pressed the trigger. Two shots thundered out one after the other, and two case-shots flew skywards.

Betly sprung up and his rifle dropped out of his hands. He rushed into the hut trembling, banged it shut behind him and slipped the latch in place.

The forester stood with his rifle ready to fire. His lips moved. The journalist felt rather than heard the question:

'The horses?'

He nodded.

A rustling sound was heard outside the door. The Otarks were propping something up against the door from the outside.

A voice called out:

'Hey, Meller! Hey!'

The forester dashed to the window and wanted to stick out his rifle. At that very instant the shadow of a black paw flashed out across the background of the brightened sky; he hardly had time to pull his rifle back.

This was followed by satisfied laughter from outside.

A dragging gramophone voice called out:

'This is the end for you Meller.'

Other voices broke in interrupting the first:

'Meller, Meller, speak to us . . .'

'Hey, forester, say something clever. You're a human being, you've got to be clever . . .'

'Meller, say something and I'll prove you're wrong . . .'

'Say something, Meller. Call me by name. I'm Philip.'

The forester kept silent.

The journalist took several uncertain steps towards the window. The voices were very close, right behind the log wall of the hut. The air reeked of animal stench—a mixture of blood, dung and something else.

The Otark that had called itself Philip spoke out from right under the window:

'You're a journalist, hey? You're right near the window, hey . . .?'

The journalist cleared his throat. It was parched dry.

The same voice asked:

'What did you come here for?'

It became very quiet.

'You came here to kill us?'

It was quiet again for a moment and then a hubbub of excited voices burst forth.

'Sure, they want to kill us . . . They made us, and now they want to kill us all off . . .'

There was the sound of growling followed by a bedlam of noise. The journalist got the impression that the Otarks had begun a fight.

Then the voice of the one who had called himself Philip called out again:

'Hey, forester, why don't you shoot? You always shoot. Why don't you shoot now? Say something.'

All of a sudden a shot rang out from somewhere.

Betly turned round.

The forester had climbed up on the fireplace, had moved aside the straw-covered laths that the roof was made of, and was shooting.

Two shots rang out. He recharged his rifle and shot again.

The Otarks scattered helter-skelter, as fast as they could.

Meller jumped down from the fireplace.

'We've got to get hold of some horses or it's going to be pretty rough going.'

They examined the three Otarks that he had shot.

One of them, who was quite young, was practically hairless. There was only a tuft of fur growing at the nape of his neck. Betly nearly vomited when Meller turned his face upward on the grass.

The forester said:

'You've got to remember that they are not human beings, although they can speak. They eat people. And they eat each other too.'

The journalist looked around. It was already light. There was the clearing and the forest and the dead Otarks—for a moment it all seemed unreal.

Could this be possible? . . . Could this be he, Donald Betly standing here? . . .

'This is where Klein was eaten by an Otark,' Meller said. 'One of our local men told us about it. He worked here as janitor, doing odd jobs when the laboratory was in full swing. He happened to be in the next room that evening and he heard everything . . .'

The journalist and the forester were now on the island, in the main building of the Science Centre. In the morning they had removed the saddles from the dead horses and crossed over to the island on the dam. They had only one rifle now. The Otarks had taken Betly's along with them when they ran away. Meller planned on reaching the nearest farm while it was still daylight and getting some horses there. But the journalist had talked him into giving him a half hour to look over the abandoned laboratory.

'He heard everything,' the forester went on. 'It happened about nine o'clock in the evening. Klein had some sort of a contraption that he was taking apart. He was messing around with some electric wires and talking to the Otark who was sitting on the floor. They were discussing something connected with physics. That Otark was one of the first that they had bred and was considered one of the cleverest. He could even speak foreign languages . . . Our local chap was scrubbing the floor in the next room and heard them talking. Then there was silence for a while, followed by the sound of something heavy falling. And suddenly he heard someone say: 'Oh, my God . . .!' That was Klein. There was such horror in his voice that the chap's knees buckled

under. And then there was a terrible cry and Klein screaming 'Help! Help!' The janitor opened the door and looked in. Klein was thrashing around on the floor and the Otark was gnawing and chewing at him. The janitor was so paralysed with shock and fear that he just stood there. He only managed to bang the door shut when the Otark went for him.

'What happened after that?'

'They killed two other laboratory assistants and ran away. About five or six Otarks stayed on as if nothing had happened. When the commission from the city came they talked to them and took the Otarks back to the city. Later we heard that they ate another man in the train . . .'

Everything had remained untouched in the large room of the laboratory. There were dishes on the long tables, all covered with a thick layer of dust, spiders had spun their webs all through the wires of the X-ray apparatus. But the windows were broken and the acacia trees, now growing wild, had thrust their branches through the shattered glass.

Meller and the journalist left the main building.

Betly wanted to see the radiation installation and begged for another five minutes.

The asphalt on the mainstreet of the settlement was overgrown with grass and young tenacious bushes. The autumn leanness of the trees made it possible to see clearly for some distance. There was a smell of rotting leaves and damp trees.

On the square Meller suddenly stopped short.

'Did you hear anything?'

'No,' Betly answered.

'You know, I keep on thinking of how they ambushed us in the hut in a united group,' the forester said. 'That never happened before. They've always attacked individually.'

He stopped to listen again.

'They could surprise us nicely here. We'd better get out of the place as quickly as possible.'

They reached a low built round-shaped building with nar-

row, barred windows. The heavy, massive door stood slightly ajar. The concrete floor near the doorstep was covered with a thin carpet of rubbish from the forest—rust-coloured pine-needles, dust, and myriads of wings from all kinds of insects.

Cautiously they entered the first room with an overhanging ceiling. Another massive door led into a low-ceilinged hall.

They looked in. A squirrel with a bushy tail, like a flame, flashed across the wooden table and sprang out of the window through the bars.

For a second the forester eyed its flight. Then tensed, in alert listening, his rifle grasped tightly in his hands.

'This won't do, at all,' he said, and swiftly turned back the way they had come.

But it was too late.

There was a rustling sound from outside, and the entrance door clanged shut. Then something heavy was placed against it.

For one second Meller and the journalist looked at each other, then rushed for the window.

Betly took one look and staggered back.

The square, and the wide, dried-out pool, built for no apparent reason, was swarming with Otarks. There were dozens and dozens of them and they kept on coming and coming as if they were gushing up from underground. The noise and hubbub sounded like all hell let loose—the sounds were neither human nor animal like—a mixture of growls and cries.

The forester and Betly stood shocked into dumbness.

A young Otark was standing nearby on its hind legs. It was holding something round in its paws.

'He's holding a stone,' the journalist whispered, still not able to believe what had happened. 'He wants to throw a stone in through the window.' But it wasn't a stone.

The round object flew through the air, near the window bars it burst out in a blinding light and bitter smoke wafted in on all sides.

The forester staggered back from the window. There was an expression of bewilderment on his face.

His rifle fell out of his hands and he grabbed at his chest.

'Oh, the devils!' he said and raised his hand and looked at his bloody fingers. 'The dirty devils! They've got me at last!'

Pale at death, he took two faltering steps and crouched down on his heels, then slid to the floor with his back up against the wall.

'They got me!'

'No!' Betly screamed. 'No!' He was shaking like in a fever.

Meller bit his lips, and raised his bloodless face to him.

'The door!'

The journalist ran towards the entrance door. Something heavy outside was being moved away.

Betly pushed the two bolts into place. It was lucky that the door had been built so that it could be strongly locked from within.

He went back to the forester.

Meller was now lying near the wall with his hands pressed to his chest. A large red spot had spread over his shirt. He wouldn't let the journalist try to staunch the wound.

'It won't help anyway,' he said. 'I feel it's the end. I don't want the extra pain. Just leave me alone.'

'But help will come!' Betly cried out.

'From where?'

The question was so blunt and hopeless, that the journalist went cold. They were silent for a while. Then the forester said:

'Do you remember the horseman we saw the first day we set out?'

'Yes.'

'He was most likely on his way to warn the Otarks of our coming. They've got some sort of link-up . . . the bandits from the city and the Otarks here. That's how they got organised. There's no need to be surprised. I'm quite sure that if octopuses were to come here from Mars there would be people who would

come to an understanding with them.'

'That's true,' the journalist whispered.

The time dragged on without any change till evening. Meller was noticeably weakening. But the blood haemorrhage had stopped. He hadn't allowed the journalist to touch him. They both sat, side by side, on the stone floor.

The Otarks didn't bother them. Nor was there any attempt to break in the door or throw another hand-grenade. The clamour outside died down from time to time, then rose again.

When the sun had set and it became cooler the forester asked for a drink of water. The journalist gave him some water from the flask he carried and wet his face.

The forester said:

'Perhaps it's just as well that the Otarks have appeared in this world. Perhaps people will now be able to clearly define what it means to be a human being. Perhaps they will now understand that it is not enough for a creature to be able to do sums and solve problems in geometry to be considered a human being. They'll have to learn it requires something much more than that. Those scientists have grown very proud and can't see further than their experiments. But science isn't everything.'

Meller died during the night. The journalist lived for three more days.

The first day he thought only of how to escape. He passed from desperation to hope, and several times he fired his rifle through the window thinking that someone might hear the sound of the shots and come and save him.

By night time he understood that all his hopes were in vain. His life seemed to be divided into two disconnected parts. What bothered him most was that the two parts were not connected by any logic or continuity. One part belonged to the prosperous, rational life of a successful journalist which had ended when he had ridden off with Meller to the forest-covered mountains of the Main Mountain Range. There had been no indication what-

soever in that first life of his that he would have to die here in the abandoned laboratory on this island.

The second part was composed of probabilities and improbabilities. It was all made up of chance happenings. And there had been no need for it to happen. It had been up to him to decide whether to come here or go somewhere else. Instead of coming here for information on the Otarks, he could have flown to Nubio and written an article on the excavation of ancient monuments of Egyptian art.

Absurd fortuity had brought him here. And that thought was the most horrible of all.

Several times he even stopped believing that this had happened to him. When this happened he would begin walking around the hall, touching the walls lit up by the sunlight, and the dust-covered tables.

The Otarks seemed to have lost all interest in him. There were very few of them left on the square and in the pool. Sometimes they would begin to fight among themselves, and once Betly saw with a sinking heart how they all turned on one of their own, tore him to bits and ate him up.

During the night he suddenly felt that Mellor was to blame for his predicament. He felt such repugnance towards the dead forester, that he dragged his body to the next hall right up to the door.

For an hour or two afterwards he sat on the floor and repeated over and over again:

'My God, why did it have to be me? . . . Why did it have to be me . . .?'

On the second day the Otarks came up to the window several times and tried to get him to speak. But he wouldn't answer.

One of the Otarks said:

'Hey, you, journalist. Come on out. We won't hurt you.'

Another Otark standing nearby laughed.

Again Betly's thoughts turned to the forester. But now he no longer felt as he had. He decided that the forester was a

hero. The only real hero that Betly had ever come across. All alone, without assistance from anyone, he had fought against the Otarks, had defied them, and had died undefeated.

On the third day the journalist fell into delirium. He imagined that he was back at the office, dictating to the stenographer.

The article went under the heading: What is a Human Being?

He dictated very loudly:

'In this century of amazing developments in science, one might conclude that science is all powerful. But let us try to imagine that an artificial brain has been created which is far superior to the human brain, possessing greater capacity for work. Will a creature with a brain of this kind have the right to be called a human being? What really makes us what we are? The ability to count, to analyse, to make logical computations, or is it something else that has been bred by society, something to do with people's relations to each other and the attitude of the individual to a collective body? If we take the Otarks, for instance . . .'

But his thoughts were all in a jumble . . .

On the third day there was an explosion. Betly came to himself.

He thought that he had sprung up and was standing with his gun ready to shoot. In reality he was lying on the floor near the wall, quite helpless and too weak to even move.

The muzzle of a beast appeared in front of him. With agonising effort he strained his brain and suddenly remembered what Fidler looked like. Like an Otark!

Then that thought was crushed and became all mixed up. Already feeling that the Otark was tearing at his living flesh, in the course of a tenth part of a second Betly still had time to think that the Otarks were really not such a great menace, that there were only a few hundred of them in this abandoned district. That they would be overcome. But people . . .! Where were the people . . .!

He could not know, of course, that news of Meller's disappearance had swept throughout the whole district and that the farmers, reduced to despair, were digging rifles up out of hidden caches.